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The Indian diaspora, culture, and foreign policy

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Indians living overseas can be a bridge to a rapidly changing world

In the United Nations “International Migration Report 2015”, India had the largest diaspora population in the world with 16 million individuals born in the country but living outside of it. It’s a 100 percent increase from the 8 million in 2000, with an increasing number making their way to the United States where Indians make up the second largest immigrant group after Mexicans.

At the same time, the Indian diaspora is increasingly highly educated and accomplished. From Bobby Jindal – the first Indian-American state governor (Louisiana) – to former presidents of Singapore Devan Nair and S R Nathan, and PepsiCo CEO Indra Nooyi, Indians are making their mark outside the country.

What is the role of the diaspora in India’s foreign policy?

“We see it in two ways: What is their place in India’s foreign policy? And what role do we see for them in the exercise of our foreign policy?” explains H.E. **Jawed Ashraf**, the Indian High Commissioner to Singapore. “Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi’s government in particular has placed great emphasis on deepening connection with the diaspora. We are particularly focused on their interest and welfare abroad.

“We attach the highest priority in our missions to providing prompt and efficient consular services. We are working to make it easier for them to connect emotionally and economically with India, to be an overseas Indian, to travel to or live and conduct business in India.

“What role do we see for them? I think the diaspora can play a very important role in foreign policy, as a bridge of understanding between the countries they live in [and India]. One of the things we are very clear about is that we do not wish to use the diaspora in a way to influence a country’s policies or in any way undermine their role, position, or relationships in their own country. Wherever they are citizens or permanent residents, they have to contribute to that country’s progress and peace and harmony.”

He adds: “Therefore, what they can do is interpret India for their host countries, and they are an important factor in many countries as far as their relationship with India is concerned. They have cultural comfort and familiarity in both countries. They can be tremendously helpful in expanding relationships.”

SOFT POWER, SOLID ECONOMIC RESULTS

Speaking to *Perspectives@SMU* on the sidelines of the recent SMU Wee Kim Wee Centre Ambassador talk, “An Accidental Diplomat”, H.E. Ashraf points out examples of Indian cultural influences in the world such as yoga and Ayurvedic medicine. Within Southeast Asia – a region known as ‘IndoChina’ before the term was used to describe the colony of French IndoChina – Buddhism remains a common thread that runs through the region.

Could such cultural references be used to project soft power and advance India’s foreign policy?

“Soft power isn’t just about culture, but also about values,” muses the ambassador, citing the example of America and its cornerstone messages of democracy and human rights. “Sometimes soft power is also a function of hard power. Both in some sense reinforce each another.

“We are reviving our historical relationships with Southeast Asia. We did that in the ASEAN-Overseas Indians convention, held in Singapore in January 2018. We did that in Delhi during the ASEAN-India summit in Delhi in January, which was held to commemorate 25 years of ASEAN-India Partnership. Therefore, we are now beginning to see how the cultural underpinnings and religious links that we’ve had could also translate into closer relationships and lay the foundation for a modern partnership.

“We had not for a long time used soft power in a strategic and cohesive way. But we have started to do that now.”

Quintessential Indian cultural practices such as yoga have become essential elements of daily life worldwide. The International Day of Yoga, first mooted in 2014 by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, was co-sponsored by a record 177 nations in a United Nations resolution and adopted unanimously in a record time of less than 100 days. Despite the rising popularity of Bollywood – “We haven’t started using Bollywood yet, even though Bollywood in itself has been a great source of soft power” – Indian foreign policy is crafted to achieve its primary goal: economic prosperity.

“The fundamental objective of our foreign policy is India’s transformation and economic development,” the ambassador says. “It means many things. We want a peaceful periphery because that’s important for any country to grow. We want safe and secure maritime routes. We want to enhance access to markets, capital, technology and energy. We want a stable international order, particularly in the realm of trade so we can grow our external economic relations.”

India, the ambassador points out, is in a “sweet spot”: A democratic country; the fastest growing major economy, and possessing “a great demography for the future”. India’s emergence from decades of inward-looking policies to the embrace of the international order has led to steadily increasing foreign direct investments: US\$36 billion in fiscal year 2013-2014 to US\$60 billion in 2016-2017. The ambassador explains the trend:

“For both geopolitical and economic reasons, people are willing to invest in India’s economic progress and development. The reason for this is that we are not perceived as a threat to the international order. We are seen by countries as benign. We are part of the rules-based order. We have never tried to play sides in international geopolitics.

"The world recognises what India is. India’s history has been one of peaceful relations with the outside world throughout its history. We are essentially great supporters of international norms and rules, and an inclusive and democratic world in which every country has a place and is sovereign, irrespective of its size and strength.”

A CHANGING WORLD

For H.E. Ashraf, who served in Germany, the U.S. and Nepal before his current assignment, the world has changed in the last 25 years with regard to “political geography, power shifts, character of the global economy, and technology [and moving] from the industrial age to the information age”. While pinpointing climate change and the rise of non-state actors and extremism, he also points out some constants.

“However the world changes, human motives and ambitions don’t change,” muses the ambassador. “Nations and countries still do the same things: Develop their economies, create jobs, ensure safety and security, expand influence and seek an international environment that is conducive to their interests. In that sense it’s more or less the same where diplomacy is concerned.

“But the world is far more fluid. We are in a phase where there is great transition that is rare in human history. Digital and communication technologies are pervasive. Today, we have to be nimble and flexible. We have to be quick in responding, and deal with a higher level of complexity and rapid changes.”

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